

Representation and Rhizome: A Brief Analysis on the Priest's Death in *Sisters*

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Abstract: The cause of death of the priest in *Sisters*, as an imagery factor, affects the readers' understanding on the text. This paper discusses the cause of death of the priest by analyzing the representations of the text, the reality and the author, and studying the literary text, the reality and the author's experience under the equal discourse. This paper finds that all kinds of appearances caused by the death of priests points to the direction- the reality of the collapse of Irish traditional values in the early 20th century and the arduous task of reviving Irish traditional morality.

Keywords: *Sisters*, Foucault, Representation, James Joyce.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault explores the uncertainty of representation in terms of truth through an analysis of the painting *Las Meninas* by Velázquez. He illustrates the existence of truth and illusion within representation, demonstrated through the complex interplay of gazes between subjects and objects both within and outside the painting. The nature of representation undergoes flux as the identities of the observing subject and observed object continually shift. Amidst the clear multiplicity of illusions and the vague singularity of truth, changes in the observing subject and observing relations result in the usurpation of illusion over truth. However, the definition of both illusion and truth stems from the determination of the essence of things; namely, before essence is revealed, there is no distinction between illusion and truth, as both belong to representation. "In this diffuseness, in which representation both converges and disperses, there exists a fundamental void urgently indicated from all sides" (Foucault 21). This implies that both illusion and truth, belonging to representation, hold equal value in relation to the final outcome before essence is determined. Truth approaches essence through continual determination by the subject, while illusion approaches truth through continual exclusion by the subject. This results in the uncertainty of the thing itself before its essence is determined. Observers can only arrive at a so-called truth through the accumulation of countless representations. Before paradox emerges, this truth is considered a definitive truth.

The phenomenon described above is similarly evident in James Joyce's short story-*The Sisters*. The text narrates the story of Father Flynn, who suffers a setback due to the breaking of the chalice, ultimately leading to his melancholic demise. Within the context of the priest's cause of death, the narrative is rich with representations. Unlike the painting *Las Meninas*, where the object of representation remains uncertain and both truth and illusion fluctuate with the changing object, the representations in the text converge towards a common conclusion—that the priest has died. The text is replete with representations, and numerous scholars have derived various interpretations pointing towards the same conclusion. Some scholars argue that the priest died from syphilis, thereby attributing the theme of the text to a critique of licentiousness within Irish Catholicism (Waisbren). Others suggest that the priest's death was a result of religious guilt, attributing the theme to the collapse of traditional Irish

morals and faith (Zhou Kege). Similar to the painting, the representations depicted in the text prompt observers to uncover the essence behind the priest's demise. This paper aims to delve into the question of the priest's cause of death by analyzing the different representations presented in the text. Through this analysis, a more precise depiction of the underlying essence implied in *The Sisters*—namely, the loss of Irish values and the daunting task of reviving traditional moral concepts—will be elucidated.

1. Textual Representation-The Death of Words

Can literary texts serve as the truth? D. H. Lawrence once put it, "Believe in the story, not in the storyteller." For Lawrence, there are indeed facts within literary texts that can be considered as truth. However, does this textual truth yield to reality? In numerous literary criticisms, there is indeed a hierarchy between textual truth and reality. Textual truth is often used as evidence of reality, serving reality. Gilles Deleuze explained this phenomenon through his description of the world as "the image of the world: embryo—chaotic body, rather than root—universe" (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 4). This implies that the system of the world is a non-binary, non-linear, and rootless system with multiple self-producing stems. From this method of understanding, textual truth seems to belong to the indistinguishable stems within a pluralistic system along with reality truth. Deleuze's anti-linear viewpoint does indeed challenge the notion that literature originates from reality, but his attitude, like that of *Las Meninas*, remains a representation of an uncertain nature in understanding the world and truth. Nevertheless, it serves as a way to read texts, viewing literary texts as equally important factors as reality.

Starting from textual representation, the death of the priest is witnessed by other characters within the text. Firstly, there is the narrative protagonist. According to the narrator's perspective, the priest died from a stroke-induced paralysis. The article begins with a self-description stating, "He was past saving—this makes the third stroke". Later in the narrative, "I" sees the priest's soul in a dream, "his lips covered with spittle", consistent with the symptoms of someone who has suffered a stroke. Additionally, when "I" reminisces about moments with the priest, he "spills half the

snuff... his hands always trembling”, indicating signs of the priest’s impending paralysis due to a stroke. Scholar Ben Stock argues that the priest’s illness embodies the corruption and decay of the Church. This interpretation certainly serves as an understanding of the article’s theme. Furthermore, within the narrator’s narrative is another cause of the priest’s death, namely death by the narrator’s curse. The text mentions that whenever the narrator passes by the priest’s room, he silently repeats the word “paralysis”, and shortly after, the priest dies of paralysis. This detail is deliberately presented by the narrator, who explicitly mentions viewing the term “paralysis” as a “sinful entity”, feeling guilt as a result. This indirectly reveals the narrator’s belief that his subconscious utterance of “paralysis” is an expression of his subconscious state of living in Dublin at that time—paralyzed.

In addition to the narrator himself, another character narrating the death of the priest is Eliza. When explaining the priest’s mysterious death to the narrator’s aunt Joe, she reveals her imagined cause of the priest’s death, stating, “That business (the breaking of the chalice) shook him... he was never the same since”. Hence, Eliza believes that as a clergyman, the breaking of the chalice and the collapse of faith led to his death. However, this representation can lead to different conclusions. The chalice, as a symbol of Catholic faith, its breakage represents the dissipation of traditional Irish Catholic faith. What does death caused by the breaking of the chalice represent? Is it the clergy’s corruption? Or the clergy’s persistence? It is impossible to infer from this representation alone. Despite the same representation leading to different conclusions, both seemingly contradictory conclusions point to one essence—the collapse of traditional Irish values. Different conclusions seem to be analyzed based on the author’s creative intent. From a textual perspective, this narrative appears at the end of the text, consistent with Joyce’s favored ending technique of “epiphany” in his short story collection *Dubliners*. This also indicates that Joyce’s preferred representation and theme are one and the same.

2. Real-life Representation--Biological Death

From the perspective of textual representation, the depiction of the priest’s cause of death becomes more enriched when readers analyze the text in conjunction with specific historical realities.

Scholar Burton A. Waisbren suggests that the priest died from syphilis. By analyzing the priest’s symptoms of paralysis and behavioral manifestations in the lead-up to his death, combined with pathological symptoms, he identifies the priest’s symptoms as corresponding to those of mild paralysis (paresis) caused by syphilis, which was quite common in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, this scholar deduces from the text’s composition that “paralysis” was a symptom added by Joyce during the second revision of *The Sisters*, absent from the initial draft. Additionally, the scholar discovers that Joyce himself possessed some medical knowledge, coupled with the rampant spread of syphilis in Europe; the textual coincidences are difficult to dismiss as mere chance. However, due to publication constraints, Joyce buried this cause of death but hoped that readers would uncover this “subtle stroke”. The theme reflected from this perspective is evidently a satire on the misconduct within Irish Catholicism.

On the other hand, Professor Zhou Kege interprets from

external information, suggesting that the priest “suffered from spiritual paralysis due to embezzlement, bribery, speculation, and treason, with the breaking of the chalice by the child merely acting as the catalyst for his death”. This scholar also analyzes Joyce’s childhood composition of a memorial poem titled *Parnell’s Death*, which criticizes the actions of the Irish Catholic Church in conjunction with the British government, leading to Parnell’s demise. However, this interpretation remains speculative, as Joyce’s personal attitude towards religion became increasingly complex with age. Additionally, it is inappropriate to base the priest’s cause of death solely on one historical fragment.

Regarding the question of the priest’s cause of death, more viewpoints will emerge over time. However, based on the aforementioned two root analyses, the relationship between the breaking of the chalice and the priest’s death is narrowed down significantly. The chalice, as a Christian relic, occupies the most important place in the entire text, and Joyce cruelly shatters this sacred object. This constitutes the most apparent enigma within the article. Furthermore, the breaking of the chalice also serves as a critical element within the structural framework of Joyce’s short story, serving as an “epiphany.” Therefore, the chalice plays a crucial role in reality, textual themes, and textual structure. The exact cause of the priest’s death remains a puzzle left by Joyce for readers to ponder. However, if we base our analysis on the author’s roots—namely, the author’s life and creative intent—the priest’s death becomes a death of literary significance. In essence, it is the author who kills the priest. This suggests that the priest’s cause of death is not actually important; what matters is the result—that the priest is dead.

3. Authorial Representation--Spiritual Death

Why did Joyce kill the priest? When examining Joyce’s representation, his attitude towards Catholicism and Ireland is noteworthy. Joyce himself has articulated the creative intent behind *Dubliners*, namely as “a moral history of Ireland”, wherein “Dublin is the center of paralysis”. Regarding his attitude towards Catholicism, Joyce wrote *Parnell’s Death* at the age of nine, criticizing the betrayal by the Irish Catholic Church. During his youth, he expressed strong dissatisfaction with Catholicism—“abandoning the current social order and Christian doctrine—family, moral values, social hierarchy, religious doctrine” (Letters, 29-30). In a letter to Nora in 1904, Joyce mentioned that six years prior, he had left the church, stating, “during my student days, I could only hide my dissatisfaction with religion, but now at 22, I must openly oppose it.” This indicates that young Joyce harbored no fondness for Catholicism. Scholar Xu Haiqing points out that “with age, his attitude towards religion became more moderate”. He “satirizes religion but is exceptionally interested in religious stories”. Joyce’s friend, Mary Colum, also remarked that “he had never met anyone as knowledgeable about Catholicism as Joyce. Scholar Roy Gottfried, analyzing correspondence between Joyce and Lady Gregory, considers Joyce a “pagan who understands Catholicism”. The recounting of Joyce’s statements by himself and others demonstrates a dual attitude towards religion.

In *The Sisters*, the author’s complex representation is embodied in the text. The hesitations and ambiguity in the characters’ words and actions reflect an ambivalence of

attitude. Mr. Cotter finds the priest, Father Flynn, initially interesting but gradually becomes disenchanted with him. Eliza is heartbroken by Flynn's death but still finds the priest's death absurd, failing to understand his inner struggles. The narrator, even more so. Following Flynn's death, the narrator constantly remembers him, even seeing him in dreams, expressing gratitude for the priest's teachings and assistance. Yet, when Mr. Cotter criticizes the priest, the narrator remains dissatisfied. These signs indicate that the priest was a confidant of mine. However, the narrator feels numb towards his death, and even within the narrative, the close relationship between "me" and the priest is revealed by the uncle, not directly responded to by the narrator. Although "I" am always concerned with Flynn's death, the calm tone makes it seem unrelated to "me." The relationship between the priest and "me" is akin to that between Catholicism and Joyce. This complexity reflects Joyce's personal sentiments towards the era in which he lived; in other words, the author's viewpoints expressed are actually historical projections. Joyce may consciously or unconsciously engage in "false narratives", potentially deceiving readers. Wayne Booth categorizes this phenomenon as a game between reliable and unreliable narrators, influencing readers' value judgments. However, this unreliable narration can sometimes deceive the author himself. This is why Joyce's personal views on religion undergo complexity and change.

"Der Gott ist tot!" This is Nietzsche's challenge to the world, but it also reflects the prevalent state of human spirit in the Christian world of the 19th century. Traditional Christian values are under assault, leading to a crisis of values, with a need to rebuild new value systems, resulting in a crisis of universal Christian values. For heavily Catholic Ireland, this crisis of faith brings about a crisis of traditional Irish values. The death of the priest in *The Sisters* symbolizes this. From the narrative perspective, the narrators seem puzzled by the priest's death; they fail to understand why the priest would die because of a broken chalice. This is because they forget the symbol flowing in the blood of Catholics—the chalice. As a sacred object pursued throughout their lives by Christians in Christian doctrine, the chalice should be an extremely sensitive object to them. Yet, why are they all puzzled by the priest's death due to a broken chalice? Even Eliza, one of the few caring individuals mourning the priest's death, finds the priest's death absurd. Perhaps the only one in the text who might understand Father Flynn could be Father O'Rourke, who shares his identity and quietly helps bury him. In Catholic Ireland, this numbness reflects the dissolution of the sacred consciousness of the Irish chalice and people's numbness towards traditional Christian values. This also embodies the core of Irishness—the apathy towards traditional Irish values. In creating *The Sisters*, Joyce metaphorically kills the priest in an extremely absurd manner, expressing the discordance of old values in a new era. The collapse of modern Irish Catholicism is merely a superficial expression of Joyce's underlying consciousness, reflecting historical reality. However, deeper still is his contemplation driven by "Irishness" (Wang Luchen), reflecting on the current state of Ireland. Father Flynn's death represents not only the decline of Irish Catholicism but also the collapse of traditional Irish moral values.

From this perspective, Joyce's complexity stems from the limbo in which the Irish find themselves at the turn of the century, a state of "paralysis" as Joyce puts it. Why did Joyce kill the priest? The reason lies here—the death of values,

symbolized by the shattered chalice representing traditional Irish values, leading to the demise of the priest who upholds old values. The theme expressed by Joyce superficially represents the alienation of traditional Ireland at the turn of the century, but it actually reflects the "paralysis" of the fact, a playful warning. Even the author himself is perplexed—how can traditional Irish values be preserved? Joyce cannot provide an answer to this question because, like the "I" in *The Sisters*, he too is numb towards the dying values. Father Flynn, like Don Quixote, roams through the burning traditional moral garden, indulging in solitary pleasures, seeking the soon-to-be-lost knights, buried alongside the crumbling Irish values in this wearisome inferno.

Where is the future of Irish tradition headed? James Joyce also explored this question, and the 15 short stories in *Dubliners* reflect his intellectual journey. In the final story, *The Dead*, Ireland is covered in heavy snow, symbolically blanketing both the living and the dead. This is the answer Joyce provides. But what is the significance of clinging to traditional values? Some view it as orthodoxy that should be upheld and defended, while others see it as outdated and in need of transformation and dismantling. This debate often intensifies during times of societal upheaval. Modern humanity is entering a postmodern era, facing threats such as artificial intelligence like Chat GPT, where the concept of human subjectivity is continually eroding, making way for a new understanding of humanity in the post-humanist era. Things we once revered as classics may face dissolution, and our traditional value systems may become paralyzed, akin to the portrayal in *The Dead* from *Dubliners*. The death of values may unfold anew.

The priest, like a 20th-century Don Quixote, wanders through the burning garden of traditional morality, indulging in solitary pleasures, seeking the soon-to-be-lost knights. Will modern humanity, like the priest, be buried alongside the crumbling Irish values in the wearisome haze of the 21st century?

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